

(Route 14 continued from page 35) From here to Old Benton, Blind Spring Hill is on your right. A large body of silver ore was discovered within the hill in 1862; over the next 26 years its mines produced over \$4,000,000 in silver. The Benton Range is to your left. The road crests a rise, crosses a cattle guard and drops toward Benton Hot Springs. The White Mountains will come into view again over the top of Blind Spring Hill. The high jagged peak at the north end of the range is Montgomery Peak. North of it is Boundary Peak—barely over the state line, it's the highest point in Nevada.

At 28.5 miles the road becomes pavement as you enter the Benton Paiute reservation, and soon brings you into Benton Hot Springs. This was the largest town in Mono County during the heyday of the Blind Spring Mining District, with two newspapers, three breweries, and a lively rivalry with the silver mining town of Bodie. Some of the original stone buildings still remain; you can see the quarry they came from, a white scar on the hillside ahead. In the 1930s one family acquired what was left of the entire town and it began a new, quieter life as a ranch and resort.

Yellowjacket Road ends where it meets State Route 120 (not marked here) with a row of mailboxes at 29.7 miles. Turn left onto 120 and climb a hill of fantastically eroded granite. At 32.9 miles, after the road drops downhill, turn left onto the paved Benton Crossing Road which winds its way deep into the Benton Range. At 43.7 miles the road swings to the right around a windmill at the site of a sheep camp long used by Basque and South American herdsmen. Two miles farther, at 45.7, turn left onto a graded dirt road marked 3S02. A sign points to “Casa Diablo, Bishop.”

Road 3S02 will eventually join with Road 4S04. Continue on Casa Diablo Road, which heads in almost a straight southeast diagonal down across the sloping Tableland. Casa Diablo Mountain is the rocky-topped mound just ahead and to the left of the road. Casa Diablo, Spanish for “Devil House,” was an active gold mine in the early 1900s and the mining camp surrounding it even had electricity and telephone lines.

Here, high up on the Tableland, the views of the steep eastern face of the Sierra are spectacular. About three miles beyond Casa Diablo, a huge panorama suddenly opens up ahead with your route winding down through the middle of it: the lower parts of the Tableland; Fish Slough as seen from above; and the northern expanse of the Owens Valley.

In another four miles you can see to your right an area known as “Pink Cliffs,” for obvious reasons. Irregularities in the pyroclastic flow and subsequent faulting and erosion have made a Tableland that is not table-smooth but full of cliffs, crevices and canyons. Hawks and owls make good use of the vertical walls as nest sites and hunting perches, seeking the rabbits, rodents and reptiles that also make the Tableland their home.

For over 100 years, pack stations have used the Casa Diablo Road to drive their mules and horses up to the high country in the spring, and return in the fall—a tradition that continues today. Casa Diablo Road swoops down to Chalk Bluffs where it will drop you rather roughly off the edge of the Tableland and back to the start of your route.



CASA DIABLO TO ROCK CREEK

CLIMB THROUGH AN AWESOME VOLCANIC DESERT INTO A COOL WOODLAND WHERE TALL PINES GROW AMONG THE ODDLY-SHAPED LAVA ROCKS. DESCEND ALONG A FAST-FLOWING, TREE-LINED CREEK, AND SEE IF YOU AGREE WITH AN EARLY EXPLORER THAT YOU ARE IN ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PLACES ON EARTH.

What to expect: This route begins on a graded dirt road—the first mile is rough; the rest is fairly smooth but sandy in parts—and ends on pavement. It may be challenging or impassible in winter due to snow.

Length: 45 miles one way. Map on pages 36-37.

Driving time: about 2 hours one way.

Getting there: From Bishop at the intersection of U.S. 395 with U.S. 6 at the north end of town, go north 1.3 miles on U.S. 6 and turn left onto Five Bridges Road. Go another 2.3 miles to an intersection with three graded dirt roads. The one that goes straight ahead and up the hill is Casa Diablo Road (4S04). Set your trip meter here.

Along the route: The beginning of this route is the same as the end of routes 13 and 14, in reverse: you're climbing the Casa Diablo Road onto the Volcanic Tableland. See page 34 for the description of this section of route and for the story of how the Tableland was formed in a single, cataclysmic event.

At 16 miles continue on 4S04 to the left. A sign at this intersection reads “Round Mountain 5, Benton Crossing 5.”

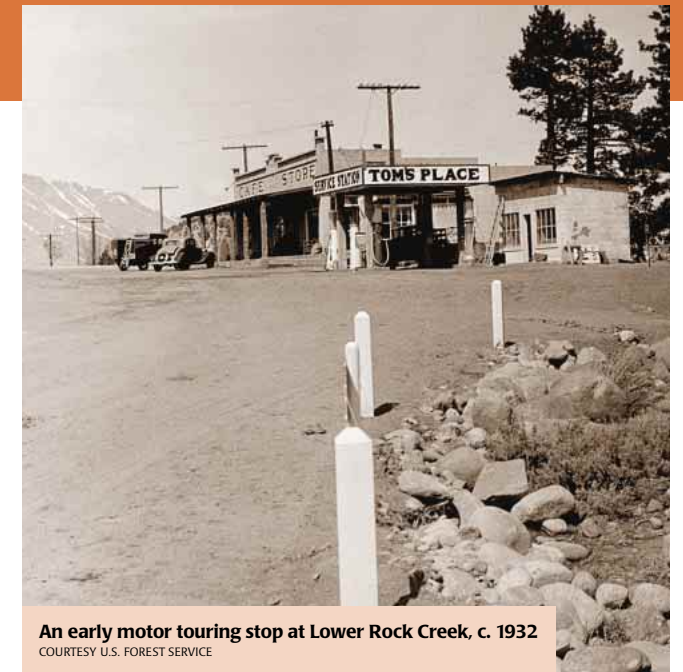
After just 0.2 mile, at an intersection, go right. Route 4S04 continues and takes you into a mixed forest of pinyon and Jeffrey pines. Jeffrey pines, like ponderosa (see Route 10), have long needles in groups of three. Their deeply-furrowed bark has a wonderful smell that reminds some people of vanilla, others of butterscotch—see what you think. Also notice how the Jeffrey pine's three needles can be pressed together into one long, round needle. All pine needles grow in bundles that are like one round needle divided into halves, thirds or more. Single-leaf pinyon, true to its name, has single, round, undivided needles. Pinyons produce delicious nuts; in the fall of a good year, you can compete for them with squirrels, chipmunks and pinyon jays. Pinyons are a desert tree and you'll see them gradually give way to Jeffreys as you climb into a cooler, moister zone.

At 3.3 miles go straight across route 4S42 to stay on 4S04.



Tall Jeffrey pines with pinyon pine in foreground along Route 15

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An early motor touring stop at Lower Rock Creek, c. 1932
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At 3.8 miles, go to the right to stay on 4S04. Here a sign saying “Casa Diablo” points back the way you came.

At 5.9 miles a left fork takes you immediately onto wider, graded 4S02 at a sign saying “Crowley Dam 6 Miles.” At 10.8 this road turns to pavement and takes you over the dam that forms Crowley Lake, named for Father Crowley, a Catholic priest and early enthusiastic promoter of tourism in the Eastern Sierra. Cross the dam and stay on the paved road which takes you through the community of Sunnyslope.

At 15 miles go left onto U.S. 395. Watch your odometer and after one mile take an unsigned right turn onto old Highway 395. This paved road winds down through a steep-sided canyon carved by Lower Rock Creek deep into the rhyolitic lavas of the Tableland. Watch for loose rock and winter ice on the road.

Notice how the moisture-loving Jeffrey pines follow the creek back down through the pinyon zone. In the Eastern Sierra, Lower Rock Creek is the dividing line between Jeffreys to the north and the closely-related ponderosa pine to the south. Ponderosa cones have thorns that turn outward and prick your hand (“prickly ponderosa” is the mnemonic), while the Jeffrey cone's thorns turn inward (“gentle Jeffrey”). The bark also looks and smells a bit different. But even plant geneticists are hard-pressed to say exactly where the transition occurs along the creek, because there are hybrids in between!

Round Valley lies below. Captain J.W. Davidson, the first explorer to write a description of the Owens Valley, went as far north as Round Valley and called it the most beautiful place he had ever seen. The views of this green valley and the near-vertical wall of the Sierra are spectacular. As the road skirts the east side of Round Valley, turn left at 29 miles to rejoin the new U.S. 395. A right turn onto 395 ends the route and heads you back toward Bishop, about 9 miles away.